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Journal article

**Graham Greene in love and war: French Indochina and the making of The Quiet American**

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# Graham Greene in Love and War: French Indochina and the Making of *The Quiet American*

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Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to talk about my research on Graham Greene, Vietnam and *The Quiet American*. Do bear in mind that this is still work in progress. I would welcome your comments and suggestions, as well as your questions, at the end. Perhaps I should say a little about myself and how I ended up here.

Many years ago, I took History and English Literature as my degree, but then took the fork in the career road named History, completed my doctorate on the French war in Indo-China, and went on to become what is known in the trade as an international, or diplomatic, historian. Over the years I have written a good deal on Vietnam, as well as on the Cold War. But the love of literature never left me, and a couple of years ago, I began a project that fused the two, history and literature. Greene, Vietnam, and *The Quiet American* were my points of departure.

But why? I think I was struck by the way that many readers seemed to look on the novel as fact—up to a point—as much as fiction. Not fact in that they believed the

plot-line per se, but rather the background, the context, the big picture that Greene inserted, the real-life backdrop to the fictional tale. If at a certain level the novel was being read as history, had not the time come to see how it measured up as history?

For now, although I am sure that most of you are familiar with the story, a brief “barebones” outline of the plot of *The Quiet American* may still be useful. The two main protagonists are Thomas Fowler, a cynical and opiated British reporter working out of Saigon during the French war in Indo-China, and Alden Pyle, an idealistic and committed Cold War Warrior, the quiet American of the title, a member of the Economic Mission attached to the US Legation. Pyle is eventually exposed as a CIA agent secretly promoting a political-military Third Force between the French colonialists on one side and the communist-led Viet-Minh rebels on the other, a revelation which seals Pyle’s fate. When a massive car bomb explodes in the center of Saigon killing and maiming innocent bystanders, Fowler recognizes the handiwork of General Thé, the leader of Pyle’s Third Force. The bombing forms the backdrop to the climax of the novel, but it was also a real event, a case of fact and fiction fusing. It occurred on 9 January 1952, and its aftermath was captured as *Life* magazine’s picture of the week.

In the novel, Pyle and Fowler are on the scene within seconds of the explosion. Pyle is stunned. “It’s awful,” he says surveying the carnage. He then glances down at his shoes.

“What’s that?” he asks, puzzled. “Blood,” Fowler says. “Haven’t you ever seen it before? . . . You’ve got the Third Force . . . all over your right shoe.”

Fowler decides the time has come to do something about this meddling American before he does more harm. Fowler is also bitter because Pyle has stolen his Vietnamese mistress. So whether from political conviction or jealousy or a mixture of both, Fowler decides to use his contacts with the Viet-Minh to have Pyle assassinated. He was, “a good chap in his way . . . A quiet American,” Fowler tells Vigot, the detective charged with investigating the murder. “A very quiet American,” Vigot agrees with grim Gallic irony.

When it was published in 1955, the setting of *The Quiet American* would have been familiar to many of Greene’s readers. The Viet-Minh victory over the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu the year before, May 1954, had led to the settlement of this first Vietnam war. Vietnam was temporarily divided between a Viet-Minh north and an ostensibly noncommunist south, although the French retained significant political, economic and cultural influence south of the 17th Parallel. Nationwide elections were scheduled for July 1956 after which partition would end, the residual French presence would disappear, and the country would emerge reunited and independent. The elections, as we know, never took place.

Disillusioned, France withdrew ahead of schedule in 1955, leaving the United States to get on with building a separate anti-communist state in South Vietnam. The refusal of the North Vietnamese to accept this territorial cleavage as permanent was the catalyst for the second—American—war in Vietnam. By the time it ended in 1973 more than 58,000 US servicemen had died. The human cost on the Indo-Chinese side was anywhere between two and three million.

All of this obviously lay in the future when Greene’s novel first appeared, but

commentators have nonetheless remarked on his predictive power, in particular how the character of Pyle encapsulated the combination of American arrogance and naiveté that produced the awful US war in Vietnam. Through the character of Fowler, Greene appeared to condemn the USA’s ability, born of ostensibly good intentions, to do great damage in the developing world. Given this leitmotif, one would not be surprised to learn that the novel, although well received in Britain, came in for fierce criticism in Cold War America, where reviewers bridled at the denigration of the US national character as personified by Pyle.

For all its supposed anti-Americanism, by the 1960s *The Quiet American* was essential reading for US journalists working in South Vietnam. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam recently called it ‘our bible.’ Later, as the American war escalated, the novel became a standard text for the anti-war movement, which embraced it as a prophetic masterpiece about the perils of blind idealism run amok.

Leaving aside its cultural and contemporary political resonances, how then does *The Quiet American* fare as history? This question may seem inappropriate: as Greene himself remarked in the foreword to the novel, he set out to write “a story and not a piece of history.” Yet Greene did muddy the distinction between fact and fiction by writing in the first person, and by including more direct reportage than can be found in any other of his novels. In so doing he underestimated the desire of his readers—and here I borrow from the critiques of others—“to make fiction fact,” to have “fiction serving as history,” and to accept the story as “real fiction.” For those historians, however, as opposed to literary critics or cultural commentators, who have engaged with the novel,

there is only one question worth asking: who was real-life model for Alden Pyle?

Over the years, Edward Geary Lansdale, ad-man turned CIA agent and later all-round Cold War celebrity, emerged as the “bookies’ favorite” even though Greene always rejected the Lansdale/Pyle thesis. In the 1990’s Greene’s authorized biographer Norman Sherry demonstrated, to my satisfaction at least, that Pyle’s views were a composite of attitudes the writer encountered in several Americans during his time in Vietnam in 1951–52. Of these, Leo Hochstetter, of the US Economic Mission, seems to have been the single greatest inspiration for Pyle’s political outlook, though not his manner and bearing.

I want to ignore this Lansdale/Pyle non-debate. Instead I want to probe the novel’s rendering of history from another angle and ponder whether the Americans really were working behind French backs to promote a Third Force. But in researching the US—General Thé relationship, I quickly discovered, to my surprise, that the British were also secretly fishing in Third Force waters too—and Graham Greene was in the fishing party.



(1.0 Greene, Phat Diem front, December 1951.)

The way I would like to do all this is to tell the story of Greene’s first two visits to Vietnam, in 1951 and 1952, the period in which the novel is set and the period that in many other ways shaped the story. As I proceed, I will interweave with this Third Force business. To the extent that I quote Greene, it will be less from *The Quiet American* and more from his letters and journals, which I was fortunate enough to be able to look at in Georgetown, Boston, and Texas.

Greene went to Malaya in November 1950, where his brother, Hugh, was head of UK Information Services during the early phase of the Malayan Emergency. But Malaya bored Greene and he decided to return to England via Vietnam in order, so he said, to visit an old friend, Trevor Wilson, who was then “our man in Hanoi,” British consul in Hanoi in North Vietnam.

It was to Saigon, the capital of Cochinchina, southern Vietnam, that Greene went first, arriving on 25 January 1951. Greene got very excited. “This is the country,” he wrote in his diary. “What a sod place Malaya seems though this one is in greater danger.” Then again, the danger was a large part of the attraction. Malaya had been a disappointment in that respect, but in Vietnam Greene discovered not one but two wars, each deadly in its own way. In the north, in Tonkin, was the big war, the business of armies. In Cochinchina the war was smaller in scale but still lethal, the business of assassins. On his second evening, Greene was invited to dine with General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, who was both French High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief of the French Expeditionary Force, the man, he noted, who had “stopped the rot” in Vietnam. And what a lot of rot there had been to stop.



The French war had begun in 1946 as a colonial conflict—the French attempting to reassert their imperial primacy in the face of determined resistance from the communist-led nationalists of the Viet-Minh under Ho Chi Minh. Five years on, however, with the United States supplying France with military assistance and the Chinese Communists providing similar aid to the Viet-Minh, the original colonial struggle had acquired a Cold War complexion. Meanwhile the Vietminh army, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), commanded by General Vo Nguyen Giap, had developed into a formidable fighting force, and in autumn 1950, just a couple of months before Greene arrived, Giap's forces had won a stunning series of victories, wresting control of northern Tonkin and securing their supply lines to southern China.

In December 1950, Giap turned his attention to the Red River Delta, the hub of the French position in the north, launching a massive offensive to smash the French defenses. With Hanoi imperilled, the French High Command ordered the evacuation of French civilians, a precursor, it seemed, to the complete abandonment of the north and with it any prospect of winning the war. It was at this point that de Lattre arrived.

Dashing and debonair, the sixty-one-year-old general came to Indo-China with a reputation for firm leadership, strategic brilliance, temper tantrums, and great personal charm. He deserved the reputation. All the senior officers associated with the recent defeats were immediately fired, all talk of abandoning Tonkin was forbidden, and the French forces assured, "from now on you will be commanded," all of which had an electrifying impact on French morale. After successfully repulsing the threat to Hanoi, de Lattre went on to lead

the French to victory in three more major battles in the first half of 1951. Meantime in his political role (he was also High Commissioner) he assured the Vietnamese that their independence was safe in his hands. What independence?



(T.O. Greene with French air force maintenance crew, 1951.)

Two years before, in 1949, the French had persuaded the ex-emperor of Annam, Bao Dai, to abandon the casinos and fleshpots of the Cote d'Azur to become chief of state of something called the "State of Vietnam." The State of Vietnam was given its independence but only within the framework of the French Union. What this meant in practice was that while the French relinquished control of much of the internal administration of the Vietnam, they retained control over foreign, defense and commercial policy. De Lattre spoke of perfecting Vietnam's freedom when the security situation allowed, but to many nationalists, and not just those involved with the Viet-Minh, the "Boa Dai solution" resembled a colonial con trick.

Let us return, then, to Greene's first meeting with General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, their dinner date in Saigon on 26 January 1951. The general turned out to be anxious to win greater US support for the

war and knowing that his guest was working for the influential, opinion shaping *Life* magazine, he was exaggeratedly attentive to his needs. Greene duly flew with de Lattre to Hanoi on 30 January 1951. The general immediately put a small plane and pilot at his disposal and encouraged him to overfly the delta defenses. That afternoon, accompanied by his friend Trevor Wilson, Greene set off, but in an entirely different direction, to Phat Diem, sixty miles south of Hanoi. Phat Diem was a largely autonomous city-state abutting the Gulf of Tonkin. It was controlled by a Catholic Prince Bishop, Le Huu Tu, and when melded with the adjoining diocese of Bui Chu, effectively exerted spiritual authority over 500,000 Catholics and wielded temporal power over much of the area's remaining, mostly Buddhist, population of half-a-million. In 1945, the Catholic Church in Vietnam had backed Ho Chi Minh's revolution but when the Franco-Viet-Minh war broke out, and as the Viet-Minh's communist outlook became more pronounced, the church shifted to a position of neutrality. In early 1950, the Vatican formally recognised Bao Dai's State of Vietnam. In Vietnam itself, the northern Catholic bishops, led by Bishop Tu, paid lip-service to the central government in Saigon, but in practice brooked no interference in their diocesan affairs. At the same time, Phat Diem's vulnerable geographical position on the edge of Viet-Minh-controlled Thanh Hoa province obliged the bishop to employ a combination of diplomacy and trade with the rebels, especially in rice abundant in his territory, to keep the war at a distance.

If all else failed, the bishop had his own army of some 3000 troops, which was just as well as a concomitant of Tu's pronounced nationalism was a refusal to allow the French

base rights in his diocese. The Catholic Greene was captivated by Phat Diem, as was his friend and co-religionist Wilson. Greene also admired Tu's independence: "my number-one enemy is the French," Tu told him, "after which come the Communists." On this first occasion Greene spent just thirty-six hours in this "medieval Episcopal principality" before returning to Hanoi on 1 February. But it was soon clear that his unscheduled excursion had vexed de Lattre:

'Slightly picked on' and peppered with 'Godless anecdotes', he wrote of his next meeting with the general. At the time he attached little importance to the Frenchman's jibes but looking back he came to see the dinner as the moment when 'our relations began to cool', an 'inconvenience to me' but a 'disaster' for Wilson.

The nature of this disaster would not reveal itself until mid-1951. For now, after spending a fortnight in Vietnam, Greene returned home but he was determined to return as soon as possible—he had fallen in love with Indo-China—and thanks to *Life*, which commissioned a piece on the war, he was back the following October, this time for a ten-week stay. The interval between his visits witnessed two important developments. The first came in April when the bishops of Phat Diem and neighboring Bui Chu suddenly took sides in the war, declaring for Bao Dai. Mounting reports of Viet-Minh persecution of Catholics elsewhere in Vietnam seems to have persuaded the bishops to ally with Bao Dai and, by extension, the French. But Tu drove a hard bargain: the French agreed to provide financial subsidies to develop his armed forces, and meantime Tu was allowed to retain command of his troops and maintain his

veto on French bases in his territory. At the end of May 1951, the inevitable happened—or inevitable once Tu had joined Bao Dai's side. The Vietminh attached Phat Diem as part of a wider offensive in the southern Red River Delta. After a month of fierce fighting, the French turned back the offensive.

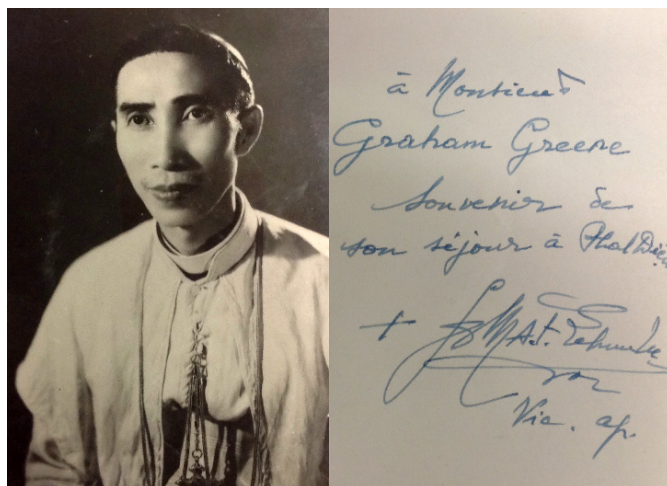


(3.0 Greene with French troops, Phat Diem, December 1951.)

But de Lattre's satisfaction was tarnished by events involving Phat Diem. Tu's army had performed so poorly that it had to be rescued by French paratroopers at a cost in French blood. Afterwards an angry de Lattre accused Tu of withholding information about enemy troop movements in the build-up to the battle and insisted on the disbanding of the Catholic militia and its assimilation into the Army of the State of Vietnam. Grief for his son, Lieutenant Bernard de Lattre, who was killed in the fighting near Phat Diem, only intensified his anti-Catholic animus. The Vietminh offensive, and by extension Bernard's death, owed much to the "treachery" of the bishops.

The second development in the interval between Greene's visits was the rise to prominence of Trinh Minh Thé, a shadowy presence in *The Quiet American* but also, Greene tells us, "real enough." Indeed he was. At twenty-nine, Thé was Chief of Staff of the army of the Cao Dai, a southern-based

religious sect that Greene had encountered at the start of the year. "They have a Pope, female cardinals, & their saints are Christ, Buddha, Mahomed, Victor Hugo & Auguste Comte," he wrote excitedly to his brother Hugh. "They number 2,000,000 & have a private army which at the moment is on the side of the French." The Cao Dai Holy See was in Tay Ninh, 60 miles north-west of Saigon, where Pham Cong Tac, the Caodaist pope, surrounded himself not just with cardinals of both sexes but sundry archbishops, bishops, and priests.



(4.0 'My nice bishop . . .', Le Huu Tu, 1951.)

(5.0 dedication by Tu ('souvenir') following Greene's time in Phat Diem.)

As for the sect's eclectic pantheon of saints, this reflected its blend of Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity. "We succeeded," Tac maintained, "because we . . . perfected a first-rate religion. After all, what other can compete with ours, since we have picked the best points out of each and put them all together." Certainly Caodaism was a religion of substance. Founded in 1926, by 1945 it claimed perhaps as many as one-fifth of Cochinchina's 4.5 million people as followers.

The Cao Dai army meanwhile functioned both as the Holy See's defensive



shield and, after the Franco-Vietminh war broke out, as an informal arm of the French expeditionary force. In return for French subsidies, Caodaist forces—some 15,000, with 20,000 reservists, in 1950 far bigger than the Catholic militia of the north—policed those extensive areas of Cochinchina where the faith flourished and provided the main source of popular resistance to the Communists in the south.

Then, in June 1951, Colonel Thé—he later promoted himself to general, suddenly deserted the Holy See, disappeared into jungle with 2,500 troops and a stockpile of weapons, and soon began advertising his credentials as a Third Force leader. Henceforward, he declared his policy would be “non-cooperation” with the colonial regime or its puppet Bao Dai or the Communist-dominated Viet-Minh. A number of unpleasant acts of terrorism followed, claimed by Thé’s self-styled National Resistance Front, including the massive car bombing in Saigon of 9 January 1952.

In *The Quiet American*, it is Thé’s violent actions which allow Greene via Fowler to arraign the United States for its idiocy in mistaking “a shoddy little bandit with two thousand men and a couple of tame tigers” for a legitimate Third Force candidate. But were the Americans really cultivating the real-life Thé in 1951-52? What we know is that US policymakers were undoubtedly worried that the stunted independence bestowed by France on Bao Dai would be insufficient to win over a majority of non-Communist nationalists to the anti-Viet-Minh cause. It was no good focusing exclusively on the military front, Washington believed; the political front too needed attention. Even as it recognised Bao Dai in 1950, the US government—the Democrat administration of Harry S.

Truman—was looking for alternatives: an anti-Communist nucleus to build round if or when the French gave up the fight. Did this quest lead to Thé?

In *The Quiet American* Pyle belongs to the US Economic Mission, which gives him his CIA cover. Or to give it its real-life acronym, STEM, the “Special Technical and Economic Mission.” The STEM files in the US national archives—oddly neglected by historians—confirm that the mission had numerous contacts with the Caodaists of Tay Ninh and thought highly of them, but the files contain no evidence of the USA’s furnishing either the mainstream or dissident Caodaists with arms.

Intriguingly, British documents from the period, released after a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) application, suggest that these denials may be too definite. The Foreign Office (FO) in 1951 was in receipt of a steady flow of intelligence suggesting that the Americans were “encouraging the formation of a separate Cao-Daist army” and officials agreed that the Saigon bombing was probably the unhappy consequence of US meddling. “I fear that there is nothing we can do about the foolishness of US Special Operations,” minuted the Head of the SouthEast Asia Department. But there the paper trail dies. That the United States was potentially interested in a Third Force would not come as a total surprise to those familiar with the Vietnam story, but what has not been previously acknowledged is the extent to which the British were also actively seeking alternatives to Bao Dai. But why were they?

In the early 1950s Indo-China was a place where British national interests and international responsibilities converged. On the one hand, the preservation of a non-Communist Vietnam as a barrier to the



spread of Communism to the rest of South-East Asia was a general Western Cold War objective. On the other, Tonkin was the forward defense of Malaya whose value to an ailing UK economy was considerable. The French, from a British standpoint, simply had to hold the line. But would they? If the French absolved themselves of responsibility, who would be prepared to lead the anti-Communist resistance? The FO doubted that Bao Dai, the playboy emperor, was up to the job. So did the Secret Intelligence Service—but where the Foreign Office could see no alternative to the wretched Bao Dai, MI6, it appears, had in mind a Catholic solution. And Greene would himself be involved in its promotion.

These shifts in the Vietnamese kaleidoscope in mid-1951 were witnessed by Greene at a distance. “I seem to have missed the bus in the last few weeks when Ho Chi Minh put on a big offensive,” he wrote to Hugh at the end of June 1951. “My nice Bishop was completely surrounded in his diocese and had to be rescued by parachute troops. It would have been fun to have been with him and seen him in a crisis.” He planned to return to Vietnam later that summer, but events got in the way.

In August he wrote again to Hugh: “De Lattre has become half crazy & wildly anti-Catholic since the death of his son.” This was indeed the case. The general now looked on Catholics as potential quislings, none more so than Trevor Wilson, whose return to Hanoi at the end of his annual leave had been blocked by the French authorities who accused him of secretly encouraging the northern bishops to adopt anti-French attitudes.

Greene eventually returned to Vietnam in October 1951, but when he next met de Lattre—in Hanoi on 30 October—he was

immediately struck by the contrast in his demeanor compared with the start of the year. The general was aloof, dyspeptic, even rude. Greene attributed this to a combination of grief for his son, hostility to all things Catholic, and a touch of Anglophobia. But there was also the Wilson factor. “He was sincerely convinced that in some obscure way, connected with the Catholicism of W[ilson] and myself and our interest in Phat Diem, we had been partly responsible for his son’s death,” Greene wrote later. As a result, “Trevor was thrown out of Indo-China and the FO lost a remarkable Consul and the French a great friend of their country.” Trevor was innocent then. Or so Greene inferred. In fact, there is a lot more to the Wilson affair than Greene ever publicly revealed.

The first thing we must note in regard to the Greene-Wilson relationship is the espionage common denominator. Greene, as we know, had joined Secret Intelligence Services (SIS) Section V, Counter-Intelligence, during the Second World War, but resigned in May 1944 and claimed later that he never had anything more to do with the “old firm,” as he called MI6. In actual fact he seems to have retained informal links to the intelligence service right through to the 1980s, passing on information gleaned during his many foreign trips, often in return for financial remuneration. As for Wilson, he is almost as elusive and enigmatic as his good friend Greene, but I have managed to piece something of a biography from his private papers and other sources.

Arthur Geoffrey Trevor-Wilson—note the hyphen, but I will continue to refer to him as Greene did in print, namely, Trevor Wilson—was born in East Molesey in the Surrey stockbroker belt on 12 August 1903. After school he went straight into business and banking and then, in 1939, at the

outbreak of war, he joined the Territorial Army, and within two years found himself assigned to SIS as counter-intelligence operative. Malcolm Muggeridge, who worked with Wilson in Algiers in 1942, remembered him as “about the ablest Intelligence officer I met in the war, with an instinctive flair for the work, including all the deceptions and double-crosses involved.” In 1943 Wilson came back to England to work at SIS Section V’s London headquarters, when and where his friendship with Greene dates from. Greene left SIS in 1944, and in 1945 Wilson joined Mountbatten’s South-East Asia Command, SEAC, and it was through SEAC that Wilson and Vietnam first encountered one another. At the end of the war in Asia and the Pacific, SEAC forces oversaw the formal surrender of Japanese troops in southern Vietnam while the Chinese nationalists did the same in northern Vietnam—Japan had occupied Vietnam in and after 1941.

Wilson was sent to Hanoi in November 1945 to act as liaison between the British and Chinese forces, and over the next six months he met more-or-less weekly with a certain Ho Chi Minh.

A close bond developed between them, as Ho’s surviving letters to Wilson confirm. But Wilson was also valued by the French for the way he represented their interests, and was even decorated by de Gaulle. Demobilized in 1946, he was immediately appointed to the diplomatic service, and presumably because of his intimacy with both the French and the VietMinh, he was sent back to Hanoi as British consul. Five years on, when Graham Greene arrived in Indo-China, he was still there.

As I have mentioned, Greene’s publicly stated reason for visiting Vietnam in the first place in January 1951 was to see

Wilson. But French security immediately questioned Greene’s motives and warned de Lattre that Greene was probably still on MI6’s books. On that first occasion the general let the matter ride, but by the time of Greene’s second visit in autumn 1951, he was a changed man. “All these English, they’re too much!” de Lattre complained. “It isn’t sufficient to have a consul who is in the Secret Service, they even send me their novelists as agents and Catholic novelists into the bargain.”

Whether de Lattre’s charge against Greene is truly merited will be considered shortly, but in the case of the consul he was quite right: Wilson, as intelligence historian Richard Aldrich has confirmed, was an undeclared “stringer” for the regional SIS chief in Singapore. Having said that, Wilson was not the spy he once was.

Always a heavy drinker, by the early 1950s Wilson was exhibiting signs of incipient alcoholism and had developed an unfortunate habit when drunk of openly espousing views more in sympathy with the Viet-Minh than Bao Dai. Lucien Bodard remembered “a John Bull boozier—a living wine skin” who was fond of telling the French to their faces that the “whole people is Vietminh . . . you’re going to be defeated!” Such outbursts irritated the colonial authorities, attracted the attention of the Sûreté, and militated against his effectiveness as an agent.

Further releases of Foreign Office documents under the FOIA mean that we can now “flesh out” the story of Wilson’s downfall. In May 1951, Wilson was keen to gauge local reactions in Phat Diem to the Catholic hierarchy’s declaration of support for Bao Dai’s State of Vietnam and accepted a personal invitation from Le Huu Tu to spend three days in Phat Diem. Whatever he got up to there, de Lattre was soon on

the warpath, denouncing Wilson to the UK Minister in Saigon for his “meddling with the Catholics.” In July 1951, with de Lattre’s fury showing no sign of abating, and with Wilson on the verge of being declared *persona non grata*, the FO decided to terminate his posting. But still the question remains . . . what, exactly, had Wilson been up to at Phat Diem that so enraged de Lattre?

With MI6 files closed we are left to fill the gap. Even so, the clues point towards the encouragement of a Catholic Third Force. But what does that mean—Catholic Third Force? In 1950, although Vietnamese-born bishops accounted for only four out of sixteen Catholic bishops in total in Vietnam, they were responsible for more than half of Vietnam’s estimated 1.2 million faithful and, to quote recent research by Charles Keith, they “embodied a growing desire among many Vietnamese Catholics not only for a Church freed from its missionary past but also for a Church in a nation freed from its colonial past.” Phat Diem’s Bishop Tu personified this nationalist outlook. And Wilson was friends with Tu. Whether of his own volition or encouraged by MI6, he encouraged Tu to assert his independence of Bao Dai and of France.

The neglected Wilson-Greene correspondence in the Burns Library at Boston College offers some further pointers. “I must not say much in an open letter,” Wilson wrote to Greene in March 1951, a few weeks after Greene went home, “but events have moved swiftly since your visit . . . [and] I find plenty of support . . . for the Catholic solution from quarters where I should have hardly expected it.” In May, Wilson wrote again of “fresh & interesting evolutions in Phat Diem & Bui Chu” and how the Catholic solution was “developing nicely.”

But this was as far as Wilson got. De Lattre denounced him as a spy and deported him from Vietnam. De Lattre, we should remember, also believed that Greene was Wilson’s co-conspirator, an accusation Greene vigorously denied in later years. However, as the Wilson-Greene correspondence shows, Greene was certainly aware of what Wilson was up to in Phat Diem. More tellingly, there is an intriguing hint in a Greene letter to his mistress, Catherine Walston, at the start of September 1951, six weeks before his second visit to Vietnam. Greene said he had been contacted by movie producer and one-time SIS agent Alexander Korda.

“The “old firm” have asked Korda if I’d do a job for them,” Greene wrote to Catherine. “I don’t know what. K’s arranging a meeting . . .”

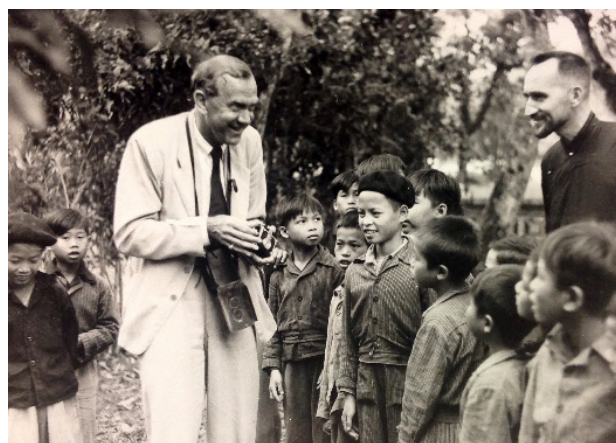
Short of gaining access to Greene’s MI6 files, we can only guess as to what this job involved. It is tempting to suggest that it had something to do with Phat Diem and the Catholic solution. As for Wilson, he lobbied the French authorities to be allowed to return to Indo-China so he could put his affairs in order. Eventually, in November, he was granted a temporary visa.

Greene was already in Hanoi by then and, to start with, he looked forward to seeing Wilson again. But as the scale of de Lattre’s anger towards the now ex-consul revealed itself, he began to wonder if it was wise to make contact. French surveillance of Greene’s movements had become stifling and he was distressed that his freedom to operate as a journalist, never mind as an MI6 agent, was so circumscribed. Worse still, Wilson cabled that he was keen to go back to Phat Diem. “I wish to God T[revor]



was not following that plan of his,” Greene wrote. “I can see . . . that he’s only causing trouble not only to himself but to me & all his friends. Such a lot of trouble too.”

On 18 November Greene dined with de Lattre for the last time. “Gen[eral] asked me if I was a member of the Secret Service & associated in it with Trevor,” he wrote in his diary. “Felt he didn’t believe my denial . . . Said he had taken my part against the police but was worried by the reports they brought in. Accepted my word but does he? Felt I had not defended T[revor] enough, but the prejudices there are too great.” The next day de Lattre boarded an aircraft for France. He would not return. Diagnosed with bone cancer, he went home for medical treatment but died on 11 January 1952.



(6.0, 7.0 Greene at orphanage, Phat Diem, 1951)

As he departed Hanoi, however, de Lattre insisted to an aide that Greene was a spy. “Why should anyone come to this war for four hundred dollars?” he asked, a reference to Greene’s *Life* fee. The sardonic answer Greene gave his readers in later years was that de Lattre had mislaid a zero: \$4,000 was well worth the effort. As to the idea he was a spy, this, Greene maintained, was a figment of de Lattre’s grief-addled mind. Yet the denial does not fully convince, not when CIA veterans have attested that he took on “a short-term operational assignment because Trevor was gone,” not when his journal for 1951 records a number of meetings with known members of the old firm, and when Norman Sherry is convinced that he was not only seeking information but talent-spotting local agents, “as any good spy would do.”

I would like to close with a few words about the fate of the Catholic solution. When Greene first visited Phat Diem in January 1951 he had been moved and amazed. The strength of Tu and his flock “was an idea, and that idea love of their country. Christianity too is a form of patriotism. These Viet-Nameese belonged to the City of God.” By the time of Greene’s next visit to Phat Diem, in November 1951, Tu and his Army of God had been humiliated and Greene’s romanticized image of the bishop had been shattered. He now took issue with Tu’s failure to address the social needs of his people: “Always money for Churches,” he noted in his journal, “never for hospitals or education.”

In Third Force terms, Catholicism and nationalism were all very well, but to compete successfully with the Viet-Minh, to win hearts and minds, as it were, Greene now recognized the importance of tackling poverty and other social grievances. But the bishop “was



only interested in building more and more churches.” He went back to Hanoi depressed.

But this was not quite the end of his Phat-Diem connection. Rumors soon abounded—well-founded—that Phat Diem had been over-run by the Viet-Minh. Sensing a journalistic scoop, he went back, arriving on 16 December 1951. The scene that greeted him was “shocking.” Ever since he first went to Malaya, Greene had been desperate to experience war in the raw. Now he had his fill: “never have I seen so many corpses.” After blundering into the no-man’s-land between the French and Viet-Minh lines, exposing himself to grave danger, the local French commander decided that a tall, gangly, nosy British novelist was a liability in a war zone and ordered him back to Hanoi.

With this, Greene’s interest in this particular Catholic solution ended.

Henceforth the Americans would be the exclusive proponents of the Catholic solution, eventually alighting on Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954 as the chosen one. Still, as I hope I have shown, there was a brief period when the British were also active in this regard, and when Greene himself was caught up in the kind of plot and entangled with a cast of characters—imperious French generals, Catholic warrior-bishops, British secret agents—that would not have been out of place in one of his own novels.

Fact in this instance was every bit as compelling as the fiction it spawned.

Photographs #1 and #3 courtesy of the Graham Greene collection, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, USA, of Greene in Vietnam 1951-1952.

Photographs #2, #4, #5, #6, and #7 courtesy of the Graham Greene collection, Georgetown University Library Special Collections, USA.

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